

DISASTER AVERTED: LOVE CANAL ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

The discovery of contamination at Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York may be the single most publicized environmental incident in U.S. history. Love Canal became synonymous with the nation's fear of hazardous waste and was a catalyst for establishing the Superfund program. The on-going efforts of the EPA and other groups, however, have averted disaster at Love Canal and have restored much of the area to an environmentally safe condition.

From 1942 to 1952, Hooker Chemicals and Plastics (now Occidental Chemical Corporation) used Love Canal as a dump for over 21,000 tons of mixed chemical wastes. In the ensuing years, homes and even an elementary school were built in the area above and around the covered landfill. Over time, contaminated groundwater migrated to sewers, creeks, and ultimately the nearby Niagara River. In the late 1970s, the area was declared an environmental emergency and 950 families were evacuated.

Clean-up of Love Canal has been complex but successful. Clean-up operations have included containment of the leaking landfill, removal and disposal of sediments from sewers and creeks, removal and cleaning of soils near the school, destruction and removal of homes surrounding the canal, and buyout of properties in the area. In 1988, EPA issued the Love Canal Habitability Study. The Agency concluded that several portions of the outer area surrounding the site and rings of homes that were torn down were again clean enough for people to move back to the neighborhood; other areas, while not suitable for homes, were sufficiently clean for commercial or industrial use. Today, revitalization of the area continues. Nearly 200 homes have been sold, 60 others are undergoing renovation, and new residential developments are being built.

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